

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
March 19, 2017

**“Because of the Woman”**

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony. ‘He told me everything I had ever done.’”

John 4:39

**PRELUDE**

We heard Brendan read just a small portion this morning of a detailed story of an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman that occurred at a well. The entire reading consists of 42 verses - which is a major portion of the fourth chapter.

We could, I sense, spend all of Lent in just this 4th chapter of John and not entirely exhaust the depths of its insight. This morning, though, I would like to concentrate our attention on three concerns addressed in the lesson: the woman, water, and worship.

To be clear, these are not the only concerns that are evident in the 4th chapter; but they are compelling concerns that continue to challenge and inform our understanding of Christian gospel and our quest to “believe out loud” the love of God that is ours to impart to the world.

It was two weeks ago, you may recall - we spoke of a passage from the 1st letter of John: **“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them”** (I John 4:16).

And also, **“As God is, so are we in this world”** (I John 4:17).

The **abiding God** is the one we seek  
to understand and honor;  
the **abiding God** is the one whose love is such  
to save us and spare us from  
self-induced sin and deadly folly;  
the **abiding God** has promised to never  
leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5);  
the **abiding God** is the still-speaking God,  
whose grace is like a fountain,  
bringing definition and purpose to our lives,  
whose Word (Jesus) is wise  
and worthy to be heeded.

The **abiding God** addresses us,  
not as some extra-terrestrial,  
lodged up, up and away in an Olympian villa  
designed by the human imagination;  
but as the God who so loves the world  
to dwell in the world,  
for all in the world,  
that we might believe and become  
children of God,  
full of grace and truth.

God abides; God occupies the world.  
C.S. Lewis described it this way:

**“We may ignore,  
but we can nowhere evade,  
the presence of God.  
The world is crowded with Him.  
(God) walks everywhere incognito.  
And the incognito is not always  
hard to penetrate.  
The real labor is to attend.  
In fact, to come awake.  
Still more, to remain awake”**  
*(Letters to Malcolm).*

When awake to the love of God in Christ Jesus,  
we “**believe out loud.**”  
As God is, so are we in the world.

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The woman. Water. Worship.

The 4th chapter is full of intrigue,  
shocking encounter(s),  
disciples seeing Jesus acting gospel  
    in ways that leave them speechless;  
conversation and teaching that  
    stretches the mind;  
Jesus reminding us there is more than  
    us engaged in gospel labor.

A brief overview.

The chapter begins with Jesus in Judea,  
to the south of his home base in the Galilee.  
We are told that the Pharisees  
(mention is made of no other group)  
were aware of the Jesus movement  
growing in numbers.

It is implied the Pharisees are rivals,  
an oppositional force to the gospel Jesus  
    was charged to deliver.

This opposition was not friendly competition.  
They are seen as a threat Jesus best evade;  
so prompted, Jesus heads north.  
To get north, though, he had to  
    go through Samaria.

The relationship between Jews  
and Samaritans was based upon  
maintaining separate lives and  
different social and religious institutions.  
They lived “**apartheid**” lives.

In 2006, former President Jimmy Carter wrote a book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, to describe life in the Holy Land today. He was largely and rudely vilified for trying to advocate a just peace.

The apartheid that existed in the first century seems to have been mutually agreeable, not so much the domination of one people suppressing another. It was a social/religious apartheid, not politically enforced and driven.

The Jews saw Samaritans as  
    living in a corruption of faith;  
their racial lineage was “mixed,”  
    so they were judged half,  
    less than whole;  
they were seen as socially inferior.  
They existed outside of the God’s covenant.  
So, they were not afforded  
    a place in  
the provisions of God.  
You can find the genesis of this  
antagonism in II Kings 17 -

**“They do not worship the Lord  
and they do not follow the statutes  
or the ordinances or the law or the  
commandments that the Lord  
commanded the children of Jacob,  
whom he name Israel”  
(II Kings 17:34).**

So how fascinating,  
how shocking, to find Jesus  
    interacting with a Samaritan.

And to double the drama -

a Samaritan woman.

Jesus has committed a huge social transgression - and it is the Samaritan woman who points it out:  
Jesus, sitting solo by Jacob's well, had said: **"Give me a drink."**

The woman declares time out.  
Come again? How it is that you, a Jew, ask of a drink of me, a Samaritan? (we - dear Jesus - do not share things in common).

Jesus has defied, clearly transgressed, a deeply entrenched social boundary. He has crossed a boundary line - he has engaged the Samaritan who was stereotypically viewed in Jewish teaching as **"being permanently polluted or unclean"** (see H. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 164). He is toe-to-toe, face-to-face, with an untouchable.

The lesson: Jesus engages where others withdraw and cower. Jesus always elevates the status, the dignity, the humanity, of a people - for their good, in accordance with the design of God.

We should not take this encounter for granted - as if it was natural. It is reversal of behavior deeply engrained, a counter point to patriarchal power assumed as divinely appointed.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reminded just this week -

women's rights are being threatened on a global scale, with new assaults on their safety and dignity." He also spoke to men: **"Our world needs more women leaders, and our world needs more men standing up for gender equality."** Jesus modeled this long ago - and so also should we when we believe out loud.

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Water. Jesus was thirsty. Tired. In need of drink. He appeals to the woman for help. Indeed, she has a bucket. As this conversation unfolds, it is clear that we are dealing with water from a source other than a well that can be retrieved with a bucket. Jesus fixes on "water" as source of life, and he identifies himself as an elixir, a source of water, a **'spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'**

The woman: **"Give me this water that I may never be thirsty ..."** (John 4:15).

Jesus offered a blessing for thirst: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,"** for they shall be the kingdom. In other words, the desires that drive us are the desires we obtain. If we are driven to seek the righteousness that is fidelity to the Jesus way, we will attain.

Do you recall the well-worn phrase, **"follow the money?"**

We live in an age where it is wise to follow the water.

Follow the water in Flint - where residents

are still addressing the quality of water available from their taps, where more than a dozen state/local officials have been criminally charged, responsible for endangering a city's health and welfare.

Follow the water.

There was an assessment from two years ago that the **"world is at war over water."** Goldman Sachs described water as the **"petroleum of the next century."** Who knew?

Follow the water.

And if we don't know, we darn well should, the beginnings of the Syrian civil war are traceable to drought - it was local conflict over resource allocation, what some term **"corrupt allocation of scarce reservoir water,"** that first inspired the social unrest Bashar al-Assad brutally suppressed.

Follow the water in the holy land, and you find the separation barrier making sure aquifers are state controlled, in the apartheid that exists today.

Water is in the well - and the woman of Samaria has a bucket. But Jesus reminds, we live not with well water alone, which can become stale, stagnant, but living water, flowing spring water, **"gushing up"** in the words of the NRSV to eternal life.

Follow the water. When the source is Jesus, it leads to the River of life, where there is plenty and healing. Its freshness is what keeps us awake and eager to believe out loud.

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The conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus takes a turn when the subject centers on worship. She points out a significant difference with regard to location: we worship on this mountain, you (Jesus and the Jews) worship in Jerusalem.

Jesus responds to this “either-or” description with a shocking assessment, subverting the notion that zipcode and culture legitimize worship.

**“The hour is coming, the hour of now, when true worshipers will worship in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship. God is Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth”**

(John 4:23).

This a teaching we cherish dearly, to be blazed on bulletin, to be guarded in the heart, to keep clear the horizons of our mind, that we not think anything less than with the mind of Jesus.

This is the teaching that stretched both Jewish and Samaritan religious systems. No longer is God tied to culture, to location. God is freed from cultural captivity in this teaching. God is liberated from small minds and human manipulation.

And this is the wonder: God becomes available in new and life-changing ways.  
*Christianity - A Brief Insight*, by Linda Woodhead:

“... the Spirit remains **the rogue element** in Christianity, the sacred in a form that is hardest for the churches to pin down and control. Despite ... precautions ... it is always open to ordinary women and men to claim ...” (p. 47).

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In our reading we heard:  
“Many Samaritans ... believed in Jesus because of the woman ...

Many discovered for themselves life spring forth, keeping company with Jesus, Savior of the World.

This is the broad understanding of Jesus that is required of us. We need resist any call for less.

Woodhead on Jesus -

**“Despite the strenuous attempts that have continually been made to contain (Jesus) within a single interpretive framework, he always threatens to break free”** (p. 1).

Let us stay the course of this lively, loving, Savior of the World that always threatens to break free. May we believe it out loud. May our believing never cease to keep us amazed.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste, for the demands of the day are many; so be charitable as you read; and remember: the contents of this sermon have not been edited and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*